

WEATHER SERVICE BACKS OFF ON REPORTS OF UFO SIGHTINGS

DETROIT - The National Weather Service has begun to back-pedal on earlier reports that its Muskegon, Mich., radar picked up evidence of UFOs in the Muskegon-Grand Rapids area. "There is no relation between the UFOs and the radar tracks," said Dean Gulezian, the weather service's area manager for Michigan.

On March 8, at least a dozen residents reported large, dark shapes hovering at low altitudes in the night sky, whirring sounds and mysterious multicolored lights that moved, stood still, then moved again at slow speed.

Initial reports said a weather service tracker trained radar on the objects after being notified of the sightings by local police and watched the mysterious objects zip 10 miles in just 10 seconds.

During a conversation recorded with an Ottawa County 911 operator, the tracker said he saw "something big" on his radar. "It's moving ... and it looks like a big blob," he said. "Oh my god, what is that ... now I'm getting three of them ... it's something pretty solid, it's not precipitation or anything ... they look like a triangle on my scope."

He later said the spots were too big to be planes.

Gulezian said that although the radar did show some echoes, "One key thing is the eyewitnesses saw these things at tree-top level," while the radar echoes were from an altitude of 10,000 feet or higher.

Gulezian played down the significance of the echoes by explaining that the radar is designed to track rain and snow, not airplanes or other flying objects.

"We do not know what was causing these echoes," he said. "It could have been chaff (metallic foil used by military planes to foil radar detectors) or maybe an airplane."

The possibility is "very strong" that some UFOs are top-secret military aircraft strutting their stuff, says William Scott of Aviation Week and Space Magazine. The magazine calls them Defense Department "concept" aircraft. "I think there's a whole family of them," Scott said.

Aviation reporters and hobbyists routinely gather information on exotic airplanes unknown outside the inner sanctum of the U.S. Defense Department. They call them "black-budget" aircraft because they never surface in congressional appropriations. They go by unofficial names such as Aurora, TR3A (Black Manta), Mother Ship, Honey Dripper, Goldie, etc.

Aurora, for example, industry sleuths speculate, is a billion-dollar, high-speed, high-altitude spy plane that leaves a contrail behind resembling a doughnut on a string. According to some reports, Aurora is capable of making abrupt changes in its flight path.

Because of this capability and its high speed, it is conceivable some observers might report it as a UFO. But Scott said black-budget aircraft are not distinguished by their ability to maneuver rapidly.

Did Randee Murphy, a legal assistant, see a blimp?

She and her husband observed a "huge" shape for about two minutes. It flew slowly about 100 feet over the woods outside their home in Ada Township. "It had four lights," she said, and "made a soft, whirring noise. It sounded like a single jet engine."

On the same night, Holland police officer Jeff Vellhouse got a call to investigate several reports. "Several people had reported seeing lights in the sky," he said. "It was their color and movement that attracted me."

He said the lights were moving to the southwest, toward Lake Michigan. One light was green, the other was red, green and white. They did not flash or revolve. They kept standing still, then moving.

Vellhouse said he spoke to the operator of the Muskegon radar that picked up the controversial echoes.

"He said he had three things on his radar, and they were in a triangular shape," Vellhouse said. "He said they hovered over Holland and moved southwest. He said that one (light) would move out of the triangular pattern, then move back in."

Could UFO sightings be the products of overripe imaginations?

It's possible, said Michigan State University psychologist Gary Stollak. "There are people who see the Virgin Mary on a water tower," he said. "Some people interpret things on the basis of their own personal needs."

Students, for example, deprived of food for several days, then shown a card bearing the word "flood," often read it as "food," he said. "You show them the picture of a telephone pole and they will identify it as a banana."

Stollak speculates a "contagion" effect is sometimes present when people observe an unexplained phenomenon, whether it's a UFO or a religious vision. People who, when alone, are quiet and reserved, he said, "get excited" when in a crowd, "the way people do at a baseball game. It creates a mob perception.

"People with this same need rush out to the water tower."

--- Contributing: Valarie Basheda

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